

Book reviews

Ethical and legal issues in AIDS research

J N Gray, P M Lyons Jr, G B Melton,
The Johns Hopkins University Press,
Baltimore and London, 1995, 199
pages, £35.00 hard cover, £13.00
soft cover

The title of this book suggests a breadth of subject matter which might result in the reader being a little surprised to find only six chapters, predominantly concentrating on aspects of behavioural research and with an emphasis on the work of lawyers rather than ethicists! But, it must be emphasised that this is a pleasant surprise, in that the book dissects ethical problems drawn from different aspects of research surrounding people with HIV and AIDS, and succinctly summarises the American legal position regarding previous cases, professional guidelines and other rulings, before opening these out to reveal skilfully the wider implication for researchers in other fields.

Indeed, this theme is beautifully put by the writer of the foreword to the book, Steve Morin, who comments about the AIDS epidemic that: 'Like the canary sent into the mine, AIDS has tested the status of our science, our health care systems and our ethics'. The authors of this book do succeed in shedding some light into the darker reaches of this mine, but it is a mine in the United States of America.

However, there is much in this book to interest the non-US reader, especially on issues of confidentiality, the pros and cons of partner notification and the difficulties of ensuring that informed consent is obtained to clinical trials.

This book is recommended to behavioural and clinical researchers whether they are working on HIV/AIDS or not. To pursue the analogy, just because it is an American canary, that does not stop us watching and

learning from its passage through this most difficult of mines.

SIMON BARTON

*Consultant Physician, Department of
Genitourinary Medicine, Chelsea and
Westminster Healthcare, John Hunter
Clinic, St Stephen's Centre, 369
Fulham Road, London SW10 9TH*

The abuse of women within childcare work

Kieran O'Hagan and Karola
Dillenburg, Buckingham, Open
University Press, 1995, 218 pages,
£37.50 hardcover, £12.99 paperback

This text aims to raise childcare workers' consciousness of the numerous ways in which referral, investigative and adoptive procedures in cases of suspected child abuse may in turn abuse mothers. O'Hagan and Dillenburg remark that they have had to explain what the book's title means to everyone with whom they have discussed their work, 'as though it sounds so bizarre that it must be unreal, or mean something else; a sound indicator of the inadequacy of training' (page 19). The intense scrutiny of single mothers in a political climate which is hostile to them; the 'avoidance' of male partners out of fear of violence or stereotyped assumptions that men play no part in childbearing, even if they are the suspected abusers; the dominance of child protection by male managers and female frontline workers on the edge of burnout – these are a few of the factors which the authors identify as producing the abuse of women within childcare work.

Between them the authors have nearly forty years' experience in the childcare field, with the additional benefit of sufficient time to reflect on the effects of massive legal changes such as the Children Act 1989. Their scepticism about the Act's supposed

emphasis on partnership with parents is entirely justified. One point which they might have added is that although the Act passed through Parliament with an unusual degree of consultation and all-party support, feminist criticism of its potential ill-effects on mothers was almost entirely ignored during the committee stage.

It would be easy to over-use the term 'abuse', and the authors do not entirely escape that trap. However, detailed analysis of anonymised case-material helps to make their case hard-hitting and specific. The main message is certainly one which most childcare workers will find disturbing and alien, and the authors' practical emphasis is strategically central to the book's chances of success in changing practice.

When O'Hagan and Dillenburg stray into ethical and psychological theory, however, the book becomes considerably less convincing. Their criticisms of ethical codes are rather skimpy, and there is a singular unawareness of feminist psychological theory – apart from a brief mention of feminist theory in childcare work on page 45, which sees it as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The least successful chapter in the book is also the most theoretical: chapter 10, an attempt to re-invent childcare theory from scratch. The chapter is marred by a naive confidence in scientific positivism and unawareness of the literature on the philosophy of social science: the authors are sure that 'Laws of behaviour, like laws of physics or biology, are operating even if they are not fully understood' (page 159).

The book's style is generally clear and simple, perhaps even too much so, to the point of cliché; there is also a slightly patronising tone at times, with the use of phrases such as 'Let's find out'. Standards of proofreading and spelling are not terribly high: for example, 'many abusive actions may escape the moral censor of ethical